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UNCLAS DAMASCUS 000315

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SUBJECT: BLAST FROM THE SYRIAN PAST: A VISIT TO THE
REGIONAL HUB OF DAR'A

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: EMBOFFS VISITED THE BORDER CITY OF DAR'A IN SOUTHERN SYRIA ON MARCH 26, OBSERVING THAT WHILE IT APPEARED TO BE A BUSTLING -- IF SOMEWHAT FORLORN -- REGIONAL CENTER, IT WAS SUBSTANTIALLY LESS DEVELOPED THAN THE MAJOR COMMERCIAL CENTERS OF DAMASCUS AND ALEPPO. THE CITY ALSO EXUDED A CONSERVATIVE ATMOSPHERE AND FEW SIGNS OF ECONOMIC OR SOCIAL REFORM. NEVERTHELESS, THE ELECTION SEASON HAS SPREAD TO DARA, WITH VISIBLE SIGNS OF CAMPAIGN PREPARATIONS FOR THE UPCOMING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. ONE INTERESTING ITEM FROM THE TRIP WAS OUR ABILITY TO DEBUNK A MYTH THAT A SUNNI MOSQUE HAD BEEN CONVERTED INTO A SHI'A MOSQUE (PART OF FEARS OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE) - IN FACT, THE OPPOSITE WAS TRUE - THE MOSQUE HAD ACTUALLY BEEN SHI'A AND HAD RECENTLY BEEN CONVERTED INTO A SUNNI MOSQUE. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) BEHIND THE TIMES: DAR'A IS THE CAPITAL OF THE HORAN VALLEY GOVERNATE, 60 MILES TO THE SOUTH OF DAMASCUS AND 6 MILES FROM THE JORDANIAN BORDER. IT HAS A POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY 800,000 (ABOUT 75 PERCENT SUNNI MUSLIM AND 25 PERCENT CHRISTIAN WITH SMALL SHI'A MINORITIES). THE CITY OF DAR'A APPEARS AT FIRST GLANCE TO BE A BUSTLING REGIONAL CENTER AND BORDER TOWN, WITH WELL-STOCKED SHELVES AND SEEMINGLY WELL-USED INTERNET CAFES SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE CENTER OF THE CITY. NEVERTHELESS, THE CITY LAGS BEHIND DAMASCUS ON SEVERAL LEVELS. THE ROADS AND BUILDINGS IN TOWN WERE SHODDILY CONSTRUCTED, AND THERE WAS LITTLE EVIDENCE OF NEW CONSTRUCTION OR DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS. THE MOST GRANDIOSE BUILDING IN TOWN WAS THE REAL ESTATE BANK, BUT MOST OTHER BANKS, INCLUDING THE COMMERCIAL BANK OF SYRIA, AND GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, AS WELL AS THE BA'ATH PARTY HEADQUARTERS, HAD SEEN BETTER DAYS (NOTE: AS AN INDICATOR THAT IT LAGS BEHIND OTHER URBAN AREAS IN SYRIA, NO PRIVATE BANKS CURRENTLY OPERATE IN DAR'A. END NOTE). THERE WERE ALSO SEEMINGLY MORE INDIVIDUALS BEGGING ON THE STREET THAN IN DAMASCUS, ESPECIALLY BEDOUINS. MOREOVER, THE TOWN ALSO APPEARED QUITE CONSERVATIVE, WITH VIRTUALLY EVERY WOMAN (EXCEPT IN THE SMALL CHRISTIAN SECTION) WEARING HEAD COVERINGS (OR HIJAB).

¶3. (SBU) SARG CLAIMS OF TOURISM INVESTMENT NOT EVIDENT: DAR'A IS PRIMARILY AN AGRICULTURAL GOVERNATE, AND EMBOFFS DID OBSERVE LARGE FARMING TRACTS USING MODERN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGIES DURING THEIR VISIT (NOTE: PRIMARY CROPS INCLUDE WHEAT, BARLEY, LENTILS, TOBACCO, OLIVES, GRAPES, AND VEGETABLES. END NOTE). NEVERTHELESS, THE SARG HAS BEEN TOUTING DAR'A'S TOURISM POTENTIAL AND THE MINISTRY OF TOURISM HAS LISTED 14 PROPOSED TOURISM INVESTMENT PROJECTS) NONE OF WHICH WERE EVIDENT ON-THE-GROUND. THE DAR'A TOURIST OFFICE ITSELF WAS SMALL, AND ABLE TO OFFER LITTLE MORE THAN A FEW COMPUTERS FOR INTERNET AND A MAP OF THE CITY LACKING ANY CLARITY OF DETAIL. ONE OF THE MOST HEAVILY PUBLICIZED

PROJECTS) THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE &HIJAZ8 RAILWAY (A PROJECT BELONGING TO PRESIDENT ASAD'S FIRST COUSIN RAMI MAHKLOUF)- WAS NEWS TO THOSE AT THE TOURISM OFFICE, AND THE CARETAKERS OF THE DILAPIDATED RAILWAY STATION SAID THAT THEY WERE ONLY VAGUELY AWARE OF SUCH A PLAN. A VISIT TO THE MOST SIGNIFICANT RUINS IN DAR'A, A MOSQUE FROM THE Umayyad period AND THE RUINS OF A ROMAN AMPHITHEATER, REVEALED A LARGELY UNMARKED SITE IN A HEAVY STATE OF DISREPAIR. THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE OF ANY OTHER TOURISTS, AND AN INDIVIDUAL FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD EXPRESSED SOME AMUSEMENT THAT THAT WE WERE VISITING THE SITE.

14. (SBU) CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: ALTHOUGH DARA IS A GARRISON TOWN, THE RATIO OF UNIFORMED MILITARY AND MUKHABARAT (INTELLIGENCE) TO THE POPULATION AT-LARGE APPEARED SMALLER THAN WHAT IS EVIDENT IN DAMASCUS. EMBOFFS DID NOT NOTICE ANY SECURITY DETAIL FOLLOWING THEM. NEVERTHELESS, THE SARG'S CONTROL OF EVERYDAY LIFE WAS CLEARLY PRESENT, WITH GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS LOCATED VIRTUALLY EVERY BLOCK BOASTING LARGE PHOTOS OF HAFEZ AL-ASAD) HIS PHOTO WAS MUCH MORE PROMINENTLY DISPLAYED THAN THE VERY FEW NOTICEABLE HIZBALLAH SIGNS, AND EVEN MUCH MORE FREQUENT THAN PHOTOS OF BASHAR AL-ASAD(NOTE: IT WAS NOTEWORTHY THAT THERE WERE VERY FEW PICTURES OF BASHAR. END NOTE). THE CITY WAS PREPARING FOR THE UPCOMING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, WITH THE SYRIAN FLAG ROLLED OUT ACROSS THE CITY AND NUMEROUS SIGNS SUPPORTING DIFFERENT CANDIDATES. (COMMENT: THE FANFARE OF "MODERN ELECTION" PROPAGANDA WAS HARD TO BUY, GIVEN, FOR EXAMPLE, THE FIFTEEN MEN BUSY AT WORK PREPARING COURT FORMS ON ANTIQUATED TYPEWRITERS OUTSIDE THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE FOR NERVOUS-LOOKING SYRIANS WAITING TO CONFRONT THE SARG BUREAUCRACY. END COMMENT).

15. (SBU) DEBUNKING A &SHI'AIZATION8 RUMOR: STORIES OF IRANIAN, AND MORE GENERALLY, SHI'A INFLUENCE, GROWING IN

TOWNS ACROSS SYRIA, INCLUDING AL-RAQQAH, IDLEB, AND DAR'A, ARE HEARD WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY IN DAMASCUS. DURING THEIR VISIT, EMBOFFS INVESTIGATED THE VALIDITY OF ONE OF THE MORE COMMONLY HEARD STORIES THAT THE SUNNI IBN ALI EBI TALIB MOSQUE IN DAR'A HAD BEEN TAKEN OVER BY SHI'A ELEMENTS UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE RECENTLY CONVERTED COUSIN OF RUSTOM GHAZALI, PREVIOUS CHIEF OF SYRIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IN LEBANON. EMBOFFS VISIT TO THE MOSQUE IN QUESTION ACTUALLY PROVED THE OPPOSITE. THE MOSQUE HAD ACTUALLY BEEN A SHIA MOSQUE, BUT HAD RECENTLY BEEN CONVERTED INTO A SUNNI MOSQUE. ALTHOUGH THERE DID NOT SEEM TO BE ANY PARTICULAR RESENTMENT FROM THOSE WITH WHOM WE TALKED REGARDING THE SMALL SHI'A MINORITY IN DAR'A, THE SUNNI MAN WHO EXPLAINED THE MOSQUE'S BACKGROUND DID SMIRK AS HE RECOUNTED HOW THE SHI'A HAD TO RELOCATE TO ANOTHER MOSQUE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: THE SARG SPENDS CONSIDERABLE ENERGY PROMOTING ITS INCREMENTAL EFFORTS AT ECONOMIC REFORM, YET THERE WAS LITTLE EVIDENCE OF NEW ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN DAR'A. IN FACT, THE VISIT REMINDED US OF THE STARK ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REALITIES THAT MANY SYRIANS FACE DAILY, ALL THE STARKER FOR SYRIANS OUT IN THE PROVINCES. OUR VISIT TO DAR'A ALSO PUT TO BED ONE VERSION OF THE MANY URBAN LEGENDS USED TO REINFORCE CONCERN ABOUT SPREADING IRANIAN INFLUENCE - THERE WAS NO SHIA TAKEOVER OF A SUNNI MOSQUE IN DARA.

CORBIN